

*The Duty of a good Minister with respect to
himself and his Flock.*

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Briefly Considered in a

SERMON

Preach'd at the

VISITATION

AT

BEDFORD.

April the 22d. 1707.

ACTS xx. the former part of Verse 28.

*Take heed therefore unto your selves, and to all
the Flock.*

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SEYMOUR

VISITATION

AT

THE FORD





A C T S XX.

The former part of Verse † 28.

Take heed therefore unto your selves, and to all the flock

THese Words are part of that most excellent and affectionate Discourse which St. Paul made to the Clergy of *Ephesus*, when he was about to take (as he seems to intimate) his last leave of them. In the Verses going before, the Apostle lays before them his own Example; wherein they might discern all the Marks and Characters of a Faithful Pastor. 1st. An ardent zeal for the advancement of Christ's Kingdom, which no Prospect of Dangers could abate or lessen, *ver. 22, 23, and 24.* 2^{dly}, As a consequence of this Zeal, an indefatigable industry in propogating the Gospel, *ver. 20. and 3^{dly}.* A great Sincerity in the discharge of his whole Ministry among them, of which he was so confident, that he appeals to themselves as Witnesses of it, *ver. 26. Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all Men.* The Apostle having premised these things, proceeds in the words of my Text to exhort them very seriously to a faithful discharge of their Duty, *Take heed therefore unto your selves, and unto all the Flock.* The Text is a Consequence, which if it be referr'd to the preceeding Discourse, the Apostle's Argument may run thus: You see what great pains I have taken among you to fit you for the Ministry, both by my Instruction and Example, take heed therefore; for it will be a great aggravation of your Guilt, if notwithstanding the Advantages you have had from me, you should fall short of your Duty. But if it be referr'd to what immediately follows, (as

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fairly it may) then it contains an earnest persuasion to Carefulness, grounded upon the foresight of the approaching danger the Church would be in from its Enemies after his departure. *Therefore take heed, saith the Apostle, because I know that after my departure, shall grievous Wolves enter in among you. Also of your own selves shall Men arise speaking perverse things.*

In treating upon the words, I shall 1st. consider the Persons to whom the Exhortation is made. 2^{dly}. The Subject matter of it: And *Lastly*, I shall beg leave to make an Application suitable to this Audience.

First, I shall consider the Persons to whom the Exhortation is made. That they were the Clergy; that is, Men peculiarly set a-part by the Holy Ghost for the Office of the Ministry, is evident from the words immediately following my Text; but of what Order, is not easie to determine, because the Apostle calls them by different names. Just after the Text, they are stiled Overseers, or Bishops, as the word is usually render'd in other Places. And in the 17 *ver.* they are called Presbyters or Priests; but whether they are Bishops only, or Priests only, or Bishops and Priests together, cannot certainly be known. Their being called Elders or Priests in the 17 *ver.* doth not prove, that they were all of that inferior rank, which we now commonly call Priests; and distinguish them from that higher Order in the Church, which we call Bishops: I say, their being called Elders doth not prove this, because that Word is of a much wider signification in Scripture, and we find it sometimes ascribed to the Apostles themselves, who certainly were of greater power and dignity than a common Presbyter. Nor on the other hand, can we cetainly conclude they were all Bishops properly speaking, because they are said to be Overseers or Bishops of Christ's Flock. For the word Overseer, in a subordinate and limited sense doth as properly belong to the Priest, as to the Bishop. He is in subordination to the Bishop, as truly an Overseer of that part of

Christ's

Christ's Flock, which is committed to his Charge, as the Bishop is over his Diocese. But as we are not able certainly to determine this, so neither is it very material to do it; we are at liberty to abound in our own sense, and may differ in our Opinions concerning it, without either hurt to Religion, or the Breach of Peace and Charity among our selves. The more probable Opinion seems to be this, that the Apostle's Audience was made up both of Priests and Bishops. But that which is of much greater Consequence, and which I cannot pass over without taking notice of, is, That some from this place and others of the like nature have endeavour'd to draw an Argument, to maintain an Error of high Importance, from whence have flow'd Divisions and Animosities among us, to the reproach of the Reformation, and to the great hindrance of true Piety and Charity. For from this place and some others where the names of Presbyter and Bishop are given to the same persons, some would conclude, that the Order and Office of a Bishop and Presbyter are the same, and that there is no distinction of the one from the other. But how plausible soever this way of arguing may seem to some, whose Cause it serves, yet it is very deceitful in its self; and, if we follow it whither it would lead us, will bring us into gross Errors. Let us make Tryal of it in another Case of the like Nature. The great Apostle St. Paul is also called a *Deacon* in Scriptures, as 1 Cor. 3. ver. 5. *Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but Deacons by whom ye believed?* 'Tis true we render the word Ministers in our Translation, because the word *Deacon* is now in an especial manner appropriated to an inferiour order of Men in the Church but it is *Deacons* in the Original. Now will any one from hence conclude, that the Office of an Apostle and Deacon were the same? This our Adversaries will not do, notwithstanding the words are undeniably applied to the same Person; which shew they allow this Argument to have no force any further than it serves their

own turn. Nothing then can be concluded barely from the promiscuous use of these Names in Scripture; and so St. *Chrysostom* thought, as appears from a most remarkable Place in his Comment on *Phil. 1. ver. 1. Paul to all the Saints that are at Philippi, with the Bishops and Deacons.* What is this? saith he, Were there many Bishops of one City? By no means; but he calls the Presbyters so; for then these Names were used in common, and a Bishop was called a Deacon. In which words of St. *Chrysostom*, we are plainly taught these two things, 1st. The confusion of Names that was in the Apostles time; sometime Presbyters were called Bishops, and Bishops were called Deacons. 2^{dly}. The distinction of the Offices, notwithstanding this confusion of Names; for not only a Bishop and a Deacon were of different Orders, as our Adversaries do allow, but also a Bishop and Presbyter; for according to St. *Chrysostom*, though there were many Presbyters in one City, yet there were not many Bishops. And indeed, though the Names were not fixed and determin'd in the beginning, yet the Orders and Offices were. And I challenge any one to shew any Church for many Hundred of Years after Christ, which was not govern'd by a Succession of Bishops, as Superior to Presbyters. And 'tis worth our observing, That some of the most learn'd of our Adversaries do themselves in effect confess this, whilst convinced by the Evidence of Truth, they are forced to acknowledge, That Episcopal Government was establish'd throughout the Universal Church soon after the Apostles time. For since no tolerable account can be given, how so great a change of Government could happen in the Church so universally and in so short a time, as by their own confession did; it makes it more than probable, that no such change did ever happen, but that the Government of the Church was by Bishops, from the very times of the Apostles, and by their special Appointment. And so much for the first Head.

I proceed, now in the *Second* place, to consider the Subject Matter of the Exhortation: *Take heed unto your selves, and to all the Flock.* It consists of Two Parts, both which I shall consider in their Order.

First, *Take heed unto your selves.* The Apostle has not given us the express meaning of this Phrase here; however we may easily collect it out of his Epistles to *Timothy* and *Titus*, where we frequently find him exhorting them, to take care of their Lives and Conversations, and to behave themselves as becomes the Preachers of so Holy an Institution. Thus 1 *Tim. iv. ver. 12. Be thou an Example of the Believers in word, in conversation, in charity, in purity*; Which Advice he sums up briefly in the 16th *ver.* using the same Expression with that in my Text, *Take heed unto thy self.* And in his Epistle to *Titus* he exhorts him to shew himself a *pattern of good Works.* 'Tis plain then that the sense of the Apostle's Advice in this place is, That a Minister should take heed to lead an Holy Life. This he is obliged to, not only upon account of his own Salvation, but also in order to carry on the Work of his Ministry successfully. For though the Wickedness of a Minister, as our Church declares in her Articles, doth not hinder the effect of God's Ordinances upon those that duly partake of them, and to separate from a Church rightly Constituted according to Christ's Will upon this pretence, is not lawful; yet it must be own'd, that the behaviour of a Minister, whether good or bad has great Power either to help or hinder the advancement of Religion. I shall only instance in two or three Advantages of a good Minister. The *First* is, That he thereby takes the best Course to avoid being contemned. Though our Holy Profession may be hated by some profligate Wretches, and a Minister may be despised purely upon that account; yet commonly speaking, if his Behaviour be such as becomes the Gospel of Christ, he

will in a good measure be above Contempt amongst the generality of People. For Men are not so bad, but that a prudent, and steady course of Virtue will find some Respect and Esteem among them. But if he be as Worldly, and as Sensual as the rest of Mankind are; if Lust, or Covetousness, or Ambition govern him, no wonder if he meet with Contempt from Men. If a Minister forgets the Excellency of his Profession, that he is the Servant of the most High GOD, and his Son CHRIST JESUS, can he wonder if others should forget it too, and instead of treating him with that Respect which is due to his Character, use him with Reproach and Contumely; so necessary is that advice of St. Paul to Timothy to be observed by him; *Let no Man despise thee, but be thou an Example to the Believers.*

But Secondly, He thereby adds Weight and Authority to his Instructions. The Christian Religion indeed stands upon a sure Foundation, is supported by the strongest and clearest Arguments, urges Men to the practice of the most amiable Virtues, by the most prevalent Motives; so that a Minister has great Advantages in order to convince Men, and to persuade them to their Duty, and to stop the mouths of Gainsayers: But yet if his Life be wicked, these very Arguments lose much of their force, they do not appear so strong as otherwise they would. For Men are apt to be shockt with the gross Contradiction, which they discern to be between his Life and Doctrine; and the stronger his Arguments against Sin are, still the more they must be confounded to consider, That he who can represent the dangerous condition of an impenitent Sinner so lively, and seems so sensible of the Punishment which such must undergo, can yet act in defiance of all this, and live in the habitual Practice of those Sins, to which with his own mouth he owns Damna-
tion

tion to be due. Hence it comes to pass that good Men are offended, and bad Men are hardened; of such consequence it is, that Ministers should follow the Apostle's Doctrine, and take heed to themselves and their Lives and Conversations.

But *Thirdly*, He lets Men see that Religion is not only a reasonable, but a practicable Institution too. Nothing frights Men more from a serious application to Religion, than the difficulty they apprehend to be in it. They are apt to be soon discouraged, and after some few attempts made in vain, to conclude it an impossible Task; and are often thereby tempted either to neglect it wholly, or else to fly to those, who will prescribe them an easier way to Heaven, than the Reformation of their Lives. But a good Minister shews how unreasonable these Mens proceedings are, he gives them a sensible Demonstration how falsely they urge the impossibility of being good; and by the conformity of his own Life to his Doctrine (who is one of like Passions with them) lets them see that the fault is in themselves, and that there is no difficulty in Religion, but what they may overcome, if they will but use the means with that industry and application of mind, which a business of such moment requires.

So much for the First Part of the Exhortation, *To take heed to your selves*: I proceed now to the Second Part, *Take heed to all the Flock*. The Apostle exhorts them, First to take heed to themselves, and then to the Flock, because the former is of so great moment toward the due discharging of the latter, that it is not very easie to imagine, how any one should take such care of CHRIST's Flock as he ought, who is negligent of his own Salvation. It would be too tedious as well as unnecessary for me to run through all the particulars, wherein the Duty of a Pastor consists; but
since

since my Text leads me to it, I shall beg leave briefly to touch upon two things :

First, A Minister must be sure, after *St. Paul's* Example, to deliver to his People the whole Counsel of God. He must not forbear to teach any necessary Doctrine, or to reprove any Vice; if he doth, he is unfaithful to his Trust, and betrays the Souls that are committed to him. Some Gospel Doctrines are very ungrateful to some People; and some Vices are so kept in Countenance by the Authority of Great Ones, as in a manner to be above Reproof; but Fidelity in our Office requires that we should neither omit preaching up the one, nor reprovng the other : And he, who out of Fear or Shame, or Worldly Interest neglects to do so, greatly offends God, and is unworthy of the high Character wherewith he is honour'd. He certainly is very unfit to be an Ambassador of CHRIST's, who has not Courage or Fidelity enough to deliver the Things his Lord and Master has given him in Commission. It is possible that it may happen to a Minister now as it did to *St. Paul* formerly; and Men may become his Enemies, because he tells them the Truth; nay, perhaps may forsake the Church's Communion upon that score, and chuse to themselves Teachers who will Prophecie smoother Things to them : Yet this must by no means hinder him from delivering these Truths; 'tis his Duty to do it, and he must leave the Event to GOD; whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear, he clears his own Soul from Guilt; and if they perish, their Blood will be upon their own Heads.

But, *Secondly*, As a Minister must take heed to deliver to his People the whole Counsel of God; so likewise he must embrace all Opportunities of doing it in his private Conversation with them, as well as in his Sermons

sermons and Catechisings. Manifold are the Advantages of Instructing and Reproving Men, which private Conversation offers to a Minister: for People are not at all times equally disposed to receive Instruction; at some times they are in a more serious Temper than others, and their Ears are more open to Discipline, which times may be easily improved to the promoting of Religion and the Interest of Mens Souls. Thus should a Minister endeavour in some sort to imitate the Apostle's practice, and teach not only publickly, but from House to House.

I might pursue this Head much further, but I shall rather chuse to spend the remaining time in making an Application, which shall be to exhort you, as the Apostle doth the *Ephesians*, to take heed unto your selves, and to all the Flock. And though I might enforce this Exhortation by many weighty Considerations which *St. Paul* suggests to me, such as are the value of the Souls committed to our Charge, so valuable as to be the purchase of the precious Blood of CHRIST: and the certainty of our appearance before the great Shepherd to give an Account how we have discharged our duty; yet at present I shall rather chuse to insist upon that Argument which *St. Paul* makes use of immediately after my Text, as also in the last Chapter of his Second Epistle to *Timothy*, which is drawn from the Consideration of the perillous times we live in; for an abundance of False Prophets are gone out into the World, and Men are
risen

risen up among us, speaking perverse Things to draw away Disciples after them; and our People are but too forward to give Ear to them, and to receive every one as a Divine Messenger who has but confidence enough to tell them that G O D has sent him. The Words of St. Paul to Timothy are the very Character and Description of our Age. *The time will come when they will not endure sound Doctrine, but after their own Lusts shall they become to themselves Teachers.* Have we not here, as in a Glass, our own Nation represented to the Life? For will our People endure sound Doctrine? For Instance, Preach to them the necessity of an Holy Life; shew them from the very Words of CHRIST and his Apostles, that Obedience is necessarily required as a Condition to our Salvation; and that sound Doctrine is in St. Paul's sense the Doctrine which is after Godliness; and that a saving Faith is that which worketh by Love, produceth a sincere Obedience to CHRIST'S Commandments, which is the genuine fruit of Love, and will they endure it? Will they not tell you, you have not the Spirit of the Christian Religion, you Preach up the Law and not the Gospel; and will they not be apt to turn away after those who are ever entertaining them with the Merits CHRIST'S Death, and the eternal Salvation He has purchased for them (which is indeed the only Foundation of all our hopes) but seldom take notice of what the Apostle teaches us, that he is the Author of eternal Salvation to them that obey him.

It is very far from my Design to reckon up all the Particulars contrary to sound Doctrine, wherein they are fallen that dissent from our Church ; but one I cannot but take notice of, as being the main thing whereby our People are seduced from us, to wit, a pretence which they make to greater measures of the Holy Spirit than now promised in the Gospel.

This is an Error of dangerous Consequence, and entertain'd by most of them that dissent from us, though not in the same degree.

'Tis held in the lowest degree by those who prefer extemporary Prayers to Forms upon this Account, that they have something more Spiritual in them, are more the work of the Holy Ghost ; and it is improved to its height in Quakerism, where every one seems to claim to himself such Title to God's Spirit, as makes him equal at least to, if not greater than the Apostles themselves. And as they will not endure sound Doctrine but run after Errors, so do they not chuse to themselves Teachers ? For do they not chuse to themselves Men for their Instructors, who have no Authority or Commission from Christ to preach the Gospel, and oftentimes as little ability to do it ? For what is the Commission that many of them pretend to but only this ; that they are inwardly moved to it ? Now if by being inwardly moved they mean any extraordinary impulse of God's Spirit upon them, they must give us leave to doubt of it till we have better proof than their own bare Words for it. But if they mean only an
inclination

inclination to Preach, then, I say, though they are never so strongly inclin'd to it, and were moreover well qualified for this Work (as commonly they are not) yet all this doth not give them sufficient Authority to act as Ministers. For the being able and willing to execute an Office doth no more give one a Right and Title to it in the Church than in the State; and one eminently vers'd in the Law might as reasonably set up to be a Judge without a Commission, as one well skill'd in the Gospel to be a publick Teacher without being lawfully appointed thereto; seeing then notwithstanding the Apostles Question, *How shall they Preach except they be sent?* Many thrust themselves into the Ministry, whence it comes to pass that abundance of Errors are daily spread among us, and our People are in danger of being seduced from our Communion; it behoves us to be upon our guard and to watch over our Flocks with all Diligence. We should, as St. Paul advises Timothy, *Preach the Word, be instant in Season, out of Season, Reprove, Rebuke, Exhort with all Long-suffering and Doctrine.* We should resolutely maintain the Truth without Fear or base Compliance. We should testify against the reigning Evils of the times both in Doctrines and Manners. Particularly we should seriously lay before our People the great Sin of Schism and the Obligation that lies upon them from the Gospel to *keep the Unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace*; and how much soever they may look upon themselves to be at liberty to follow their own humours, and how innocent soever it may seem to them

m, to run after every one that sets up for a
 teacher; yet let them know, that that Apostoli-
 Precept is still in force, *Obey those that have*
Rule over you, for they watch for your Souls;
 and that the Ministers of the established Church are
 those Persons to whom this Obedience in Spi-
 ritual things is due by the Law of God. For since
 their Call to the Ministry is in all things agreea-
 ble to the Will of Christ; and the Church they are
 pointed to Officiate in, is constituted according
 to the same Will of Christ; all Christians of this
 Nation are obliged to continue Members of this
 Church, to hold constant Communion with it, and
 to pay such Obedience to the Ministers of it, as is
 required by the Law of Christ to Gospel Ministers. And
 we should thus instruct them in this great Duty,
 that we should take care that neither by the Vicious-
 ness of our Lives, or Negligence in our Callings,
 we give offence to weak Brethren, and alienate their
 Minds from our Communion. For though this will
 not justify them who leave the Church upon this
 account; yet it will greatly aggravate our Guilt,
 and that most grievous Wo will belong to us, which
 our Saviour has denounced against such as offend
 those little ones that believe in him: Which that it
 may never be denounced against any of us, let us
 humbly beg of God, for Jesus Christ's sake. *Amen.*

F I N I S.



